



# Creating a Culture that Promotes Long-term Engagement with LEAP\* Participants

\*Linking Employment Activities Pre-Release

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While it is widely accepted that a continuity of services from correctional facility to the community is an essential component of reentry services, maintaining contact with justice-involved individuals as they return home can be a daunting challenge. Some returning citizens may lose enthusiasm for following their reentry plans as they encounter the pressures of day-to-day life on the outside. Others may lose contact as they move from one short-term housing arrangement to the other. And some may revert back to criminal thinking patterns as they rejoin family and friends who exert a negative influence on them. Programs that provide reentry services in correctional facilities must anticipate these challenges and use strategies that promote long-term engagement with their participants.

This bulletin will explore the strategies that are being used by the San Diego Workforce Partnership, a LEAP grantee that has succeeded in making connections with participants who continue long after release from custody. The San Diego Workforce Partnership has managed two LEAP grants. The first served a male population and the second provided services to justice-involved females. Kristen Walker, a Program Specialist with the San Diego Workforce Partnership, reports that developing a culture of compassion and trust is essential for developing long-term relationships with program participants. The process of creating that culture began with their planning process for the initiative and evolved as they learned and continue to learn through their experiences with the participants.

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*Maintaining contact with justice-involved individuals as they transition from correctional facility to the community can be a daunting challenge. But these challenges can be overcome by creating a culture that promotes long-term engagement with program participants. This bulletin looks at practical strategies for creating that culture. It features the work of the San Diego Workforce Partnership, a LEAP grantee that has succeeded in making connections that continue long after release from custody.*

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## Creating a Culture of Compassion across Agencies

While a jail-based workforce center must distinguish itself as a separate entity in a correctional facility, it cannot afford to operate in isolation. If program participants receive inconsistent messages from custodial staff, probation officers and project staff, they are not likely to trust

what they hear, and follow through on their reentry plans. The San Diego Workforce Partnership aligned these different institutional cultures by identifying champions in the sheriff's department and the county's probation department who were eager to support the project's objectives. These champions helped ensure that each partner provided a consistent message of compassion and trust. To ensure that their messages were consistent with the needs of participants, they conducted focus groups with the residents of the facility during the implementation phase of the project. This not only provided them with valuable feedback, but also created an interest in the program and in the facility, and generated excitement about the project. The correctional staff could not help but take notice as well, and that helped promote their support for the program.

Walker noted that their visit to Montgomery County Correctional Facility's Employment Job Center encouraged them to distinguish their center and its activities from the rest of the facility. They had their job center painted a different color and program participants were given the opportunity to design inspirational artwork for the center which was printed by the facility's print shop. This gave them a sense of ownership of the space and encouraged them to support the work that took place there. They also received permission from the sheriff to allow program participants to wear suits for mock job interviews, a significant departure from the status quo.



*All of the project's partners join in to celebrate the success of a program participant.*

## **No Time for Negativity**

Whenever a program participant enters the job center, a staff member stops what he or she is doing, gets up, greets that person using the courteous title "Mr." or "Mrs.," and shakes his/her hand. The word "inmate" is not allowed to be used in the job center. According to Walker, these practices change the dynamic of how relationships are formed with participants and help center those relationships on trust and respect. It is no small measure of the impact these practices are having that program participants use the term "the happy people" to describe project staff.

Walker believes that courtesy and optimism are very important. “We understand the need for boundaries,” she said, “but that does not prevent us from being warm and welcoming. No negativity is allowed in the job center. There’s no time for that.”

To keep their communications to program participants clear and easy to remember, they’ve adopted a key message that uses an A-B-C acronym. They tell program participants that their objectives are to help them get “A” job as quickly as possible, help them get a “B”etter paying job, and help them develop a “C”areer. This sets an upbeat tone for their work and provides program participants with some assurance that their involvement will yield tangible benefits. They also generate enthusiasm for the program by sharing success stories with correctional staff. When a program graduate secures work, an email is sent out immediately to all project partners. In a world where recidivism is the rule rather than the exception, hearing about successful outcomes is very inspiring.

## Nurturing Partnerships

Walker noted that memorandums of understanding alone do not guarantee successful partnerships. To maintain and strengthen their partnerships and ensure that the project’s objectives are met, they hold regularly scheduled team meetings involving the sheriff’s office and the probation department. The meetings always begin on a positive note.

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*“Second Chance made a difference in my life. I never had a resume before I came here and I never had a real job. I am thankful for the skills they taught me.”*

*Jose, Job Center Participant*

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Rather than starting with problems or “pain points,” they begin by asking, “What is going well?” This technique not only changes the dynamics of the meeting, it also encourages thinking patterns that facilitate problem solving throughout the day.

Walker values the perspective of her criminal justice partners and has used their input to inform the project’s design. She said that while all of the prisoners receive pre-release guidance, only a subset of this population receives intensive post-release services. The team was tasked with determining who would benefit the most from post-release services and everyone’s perspective was helpful, especially that provided by the probation officers. Walker said that they had the whole story -- the entire criminal record -- and had a good handle on what challenges a program participant would face upon release.

Based on their feedback, they developed two instructional tracks: a four-week curriculum for those whose incarceration was expected to be brief, and an eight-week curriculum for those with longer stays. Both tracks covered the same work-readiness content, but the longer track included cognitive behavioral exercises and road mapping. The latter requires a program participant to identify pitfalls from the past and develop strategies for coping with those pitfalls in the future.

## Relationship Building

Whether their time in the correctional facility was brief or long, the key to maintaining a continuity of service with program participants relies heavily on relationship building. Walker says that it begins with the staff hiring process. They sought to hire mission-oriented persons who are passionate about their work. “For them,” Walker says, “it’s more than just a job.” To that end, they hired staff members whose lives were affected by incarceration in some way and who could relate to the challenges faced by program participants. Walker said that they use a human-centered design model which emphasizes the need to be non-judgmental and show compassion. Finding what motivates each program participant beyond securing work is essential. To do so, they keep profiles on program participants that go beyond reporting requirements. This information has proven to be invaluable in their efforts to stay connected with program graduates and keep them motivated following release.

“Sometimes you have to carry hope for participants until they can carry it on their own,” Walker said. “We will never shame them,” she added, but we will ask them to take responsibility for their lives.”

To learn more about the San Diego Workforce Partnership’s LEAP initiative and watch a video describing their work, visit <http://workforce.org/reentry-works>.

